

# PROTO MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY INNOVATION AND BEYOND<sup>1</sup>

by STEVE YATES  
(Albuquerque, N.M.)

## **Abstract**

The first decades of the twentieth century redefined art and science across Europe and America to Asia. Individuals searched for revolutionary new forms of expression, meaning and knowledge, which helped usher in the future of the modern era. Photography played an integral role in the development of Modern Art by individual efforts of artists and critics. They explored the changing world with innovations while developing visual vocabularies beyond tradition. Like the inventions of photography in the preceding century, modern photography evolved through a formative experimental process. Including multidisciplinary approaches where no single philosophy or style prevailed. Forging new models. Expanding the autonomy of the medium as well as creating new relationships with other art forms, from painting, printmaking, sculpture and literature, to cinema, music, architecture and theatre. Correspondingly discovering abstract forms unrelated to realism. The transition into the modern era encouraged independent vision rather than conforming to past conventions or genre. Prototypes of modern photography share lessons about unlimited potentials, again in today's transition that moves beyond the postmodern era.

**Keywords:** Modern Art; Visual vocabulary; Experimental process; Prototypes of modern photography.

Artists and critics, writers and theorists, museum curators, directors and gallerists established modern photography in the course of progressive art movements in the early twentieth century. While Impressionism and Post-Impressionism helped open the doors to Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism and Constructivism in painting, sculpture and architecture, modern photography established its own attributes as a distinct medium of artistic expression. Proto modern forms of photography emerged in part, out of the international style of Pictorialism during the first decades. In the essay "Art is Dead", Marius de Zayas wrote in 1912, "the modern artist is the prototype of consciousness... an eclectic in spirit and an iconoclast in action". These artists "express the character of their time... they are the product of modern conditions"<sup>2</sup>.

The Pictorial Photography and its reactionary counterpart, the Photo-Secession, led the way at the dawn of the modern era in 1902. The Photo-Secessionist Movement was an informal society of contemporary American photographers that began in reaction to academicism with counterparts organized throughout Europe. "In Europe, in Germany and in Austria," wrote Alfred Stieglitz, "there have been splits in the art circles and the moderns call themselves Secessionists, so Photo-Secession really hitches up with the art world."<sup>3</sup> Subsequent breakthroughs by artists and writers in coming years established a wide diversity of prototypes and writings about modern photography, emerging out of, and away from, Pictorialism in many unprecedented forms.

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<sup>1</sup> Revised and expanded from research, originally published as the *The Artist and the Critic* in the inaugural exhibition and catalog *Proto Modern Photography*, Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, traveling to George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester, New York in 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Marius de Zayas, *Art is Dead, Camera Work*, number 39, July 1912, 21. Editor Alfred Stieglitz also collaborated a few years later with magazine *291* with his gallery name at the suggestion of de Zayas to showcase the avant-garde in the US and Europe. For Cubism's influence in the U.S. see John Pultz and Catherine B. Scallen, *Cubism and American Photography, 1920-1930*, Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> From the conversation recorded in *Twice a Year*, Numbers 8-9, 1942, 117, as quoted in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the present*, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, fourth revision, 1964, 105. Further scholarly perspectives about the Photo-Secession include Robert Doty, *Photography as a Fine Art*, Foreword by Beaumont Newhall, George Eastman House, Monograph Number 1, NY: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, Inc., 1960, and Peter C. Bunnell, editor, *A Photographic Vision: Pictorial Photography, 1889-1923*, Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1980.

At the height of Pictorial photography, Stieglitz combined the terms. Emphasizing modern in terms of “new” methods while writing about “ideas” in photography. In the essay “Modern Pictorial Photography” in *The Century Magazine* the same year he writes: “The modern photographer has it in his power to direct and mold as he wills virtually every stage of the making of his picture.” He continues by distinguishing qualities in print making as independent from the other arts. “With the modern methods at command there are virtually no limitations to the individuality that can be conveyed in the photographic prints... Each individual print has an identity of its own”<sup>4</sup>.

It was Pictorial photography that first brought modern art to America in many art mediums, styles and media. Early in 1908, drawings by Auguste Rodin were exhibited at the Photo-Secession Gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York City. Followed by the first American retrospective of Henri Matisse that included etchings, drawings, watercolors, lithographs and oil paintings. A wide array of printing methods in photography were exhibited with modern pioneers in painting and sculpture as Cézanne, Cubists Braque and Picasso, Constantin Brâncuși, Picabia, Max Weber and American modernists John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O’Keeffe, Arthur Dove among others (Fig. 1).

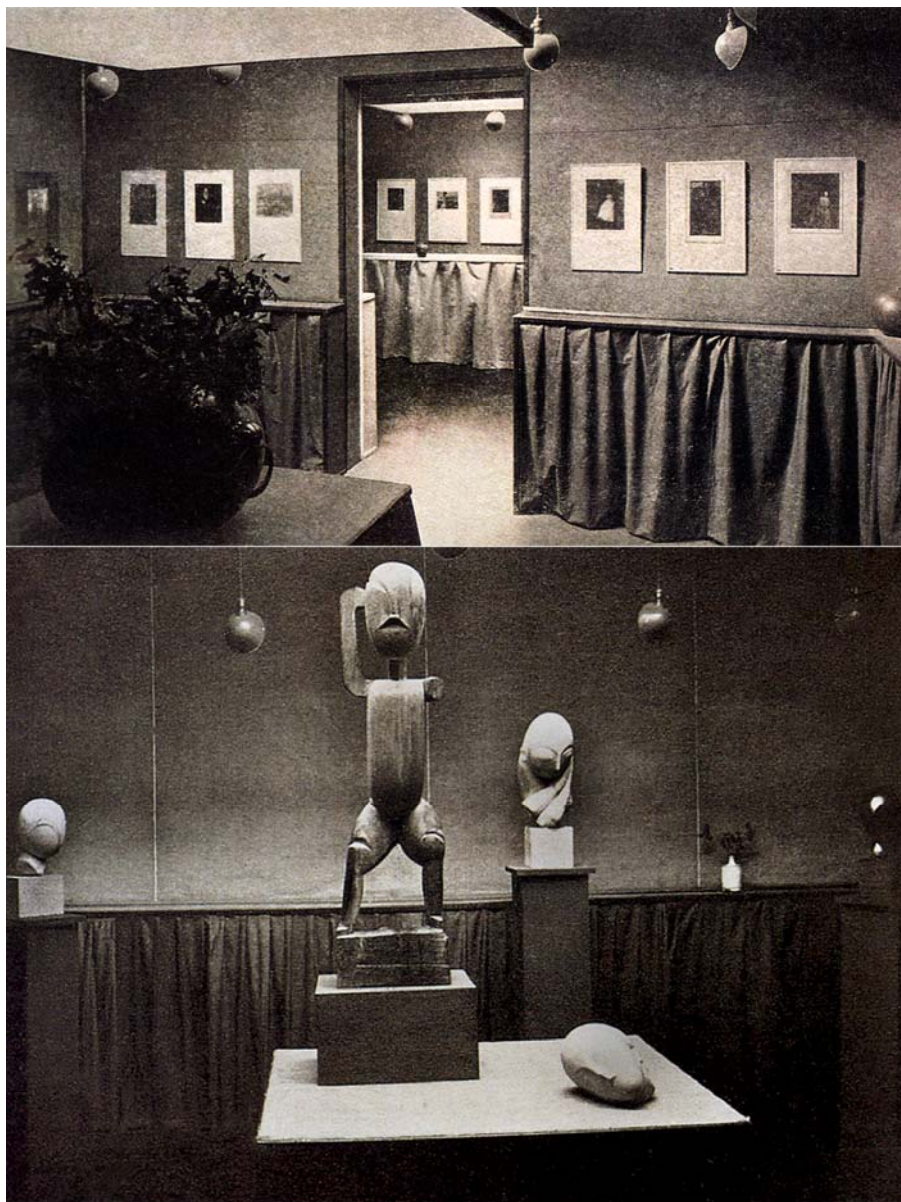


Fig. 1. Exhibitions views: Gertrude Käsebier and Clarence H. White, Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, 291 Fifth Avenue, New York, 1906, Camera Work, Number 14, 1906. Constantin Brâncuși, 291 Gallery, 1914, Camera Work, number 48, 1916.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Stieglitz, *Modern Pictorial Photography*, The Century Magazine, October 1902, 824–825.

The *Younger American Painters* exhibition in March 1910 surveyed modern art to further define the art of photography. “Photo-Secession stood first for a secession from the accepted standards of photography”, Stieglitz wrote. “And started out to prove that photography was entitled to an equal footing among the arts with the productions of painters whose attitude was photographic”. Distinguishing the variety of printing forms expanding photography into the soft-focus, hand-made style of Pictorialism, Stieglitz further noted: “the camera had the advantage over the best trained eye and hand... the other arts could only prove themselves superior to photography by making their aim dependent on other qualities than accurate reproduction... non-photographic in their attitude... toward representation of form”<sup>5</sup>.

He continued directing the 291 Gallery with curatorial collaborations. Marius de Zayas and Edward Steichen contacted artists directly in Europe along with Cubist painter Max Weber. The Russian born artist especially provided knowledge of modern art, painting and abstraction from training and seeing modernism begin in Europe. His studio practice located briefly in the third room of the Gallery and close association with Stieglitz contributed to the international exchange of ideas. Weber designed exhibitions such as the International Exhibition of Pictorial Photography in 1910. He wrote essays in modern art for *Camera Work* while developing his modern style, publishing *Essays on Art* and Cubist poetry. Further close associations working with photographers Alvin Langdon Coburn and Clarence White were mutually influential (Fig. 2)<sup>6</sup>.



Fig. 2. Paul Anderson, *Max Weber and Clarence White*, platinum photograph, 1914.

The three founding faculty members of the Clarence H. White School of Photography, New York City. Collection of Joy S. Weber.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Stieglitz, *Paintings by Young Americans*, *Camera Work*, number 30, April 1910, 53–4.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *Essays on Art*, New York: William Edward Rudge, June 1916. The essays on aesthetics were drawn from lectures to the first generation of students in modern photography at the Clarence H. White School of Photography where Weber was a founding faculty member from 1914–1918. Reprinted by Gerald Peters Gallery, New York and Santa Fe, 2000. Percy North, *Max Weber, The Cubist Decade, 1910–1920*, Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1991, 22.



As an artist, Stieglitz continually reshaped what he termed “the idea of photography” in a cultivating process fueled by his beliefs. From experiments in printmaking from the darkroom to alternative processes including photogravures with ink on paper. Influencing artists, critics and writers along with the modern art exhibitions at 291 Gallery. His active editorial directions in the periodicals *Camera Notes* and *Camera Work* provided a broad diversity of voices in the early modern era<sup>7</sup>.

Although Stieglitz did not make his first modern photographs until a decade later, his photographic prints contained many dimensions. His photograph “The Steerage” made on the high speed, transatlantic ocean liner SS Kaiser Wilhelm II during a trip to Europe in 1907 shared various aspects. Viewing the lower ship cargo deck where immigrants stayed, too poor to travel on the upper decks of the luxury liner. Printed in many forms from chemical photographs made in the darkroom to photogravures that converted fine prints to ink on paper. Pablo Picasso, completing his first Cubist paintings the same year as *Les Femmes d’Alger*, later saw and admired the photograph (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Alfred Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, photogravure, 1907.

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<sup>7</sup> For Alfred Stieglitz’s important role during the formative period of modern art see Sarah Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Idea of Photography*, Alfred Stieglitz, *Photographs and Writings*, Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, Callaway Editions, 1983, 17–24.

Stieglitz's work embraced innovative aspirations. Some that later culminated into modernist doctrine. Marius de Zayas later wrote in 1914 that "The Steerage" evolved from the "objectivity of form" into further works with "the representation of feeling and ideas through material equivalents – abstract form"<sup>8</sup>. Historians note its multiple characteristics "as a turning point in photography: the summation of a tradition, and the indication of new directions. It is a picture at once photographic, in that an instant of time is held forever, formalistic in its strong graphic framework and humanistic in its sympathetic yet objective emotionally-charged social comment"<sup>9</sup>.

Early forms of proto modern photography emerged from various sources in the mainstream of modern art internationally. Offering prototypes, the tenets of modern photography were not born in isolation. They emerged in the crosscurrents of progressive art movements beginning with Cubism and Futurism. From independent innovators including a European manifesto. Never becoming a single prescribed movement or isolated style. Modern artists, photographers and critics forged the discourse. Establishing doctrine with a variety of media that expanded into multidisciplinary practices.

As artists move from convention into uncharted territory, they experiment with elements from the past to create the new. The hybrid of proven practices and past vocabularies – combined with unconventional elements and approaches – creates alternatives to accepted standards. Parts of traditional vocabularies from the nineteenth century were forged into a formative process with new ideas. Modern photography joined the innovations of modernism in many forms. By the 1920s, artists, writers and critics established photography's primary role in the mainstream of modern art.

In 1901, Pierre Dubreuil conceived of photographs with ideas beyond the descriptive power of the camera. The following year his photographs were influenced by the work of American Pictorialist photographers who started the Photo-Secession.<sup>10</sup> Dubreuil began to combine angled viewpoints with the camera to create modern subjects and forms with the soft-focus print making of Pictorialism. By 1908 he traveled to Paris to experience Cubist and Futurist painting firsthand. The result was directly translated into an early form of proto modern photography. Combining in part the canons of Pictorialism and fine printmaking. "Mightiness" contains modern age machinery in motion and viewpoint. The railroad locomotive moves towards the camera and the viewer. After his introduction to Cubism, Dubreuil made the modern abstract work titled "Interpretations Picasso: The Railroad", which transforms the subject into facets of analytical Cubism with further fragments of form (Fig. 4 and 5). The photographic work was further translated into ink on paper as a finely printed photogravure. Other photographers as Malcolm Arbuthnot were mentioned in *Camera Work* as "indebted to the influence of Coburn" as early as 1908<sup>11</sup>.

At the same time Sadakichi Hartmann noted the distinct shift of intent in the photographs of Alvin Langdon Coburn. Coburn began developing modern aspirations with urban subjects and portraits with Pictorial style in the first decade of the twentieth century. Adding further dimensions of meaning to the content of the photograph beyond established approaches and conventions. Hartmann mentions the artist's advance of specific photographic qualities, which contributed beyond the traditional medium in his essay in *Camera Work*:

*Now the structural qualities in these prints of Coburn's is partly due to the use of the platinotype [platinum print]; to the pledge which the operator imposes on himself of adhering to the facts; but that he should have thought of using the process with this intention indicates in himself a feeling for the significance of form and structure. It is the prevalence of this feeling throughout all these prints which... represents a firm foundation of the artistic perception, in which the accessory motive of lighting, tones and texture... may surely be developed*<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Marius de Zayas, *The Steerage*, 291, numbers 7–8, September – October 1915 and *Caricature: Absolute and Relative*, *Camera Work*, number 46, April 1914, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Beaumont Newhall, *Photo Eye of the 20s*, unpublished manuscript, 1970. 18. Picasso's reaction is noted in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography*, fifth edition, 1982, 168.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Jacobson, *A Modernist Among the Pictorialists, Pierre Dubreuil, Photographs 1896–1935*, San Diego: Dubroni Press, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Arbuthnot's early work is noted in a review of the Linked Ring Salon of 1908 in *Camera Work*, number 25, 1909, 29. Most of Arbuthnot's work was destroyed in a fire while some Pictorial photographs remain part of the Royal Photographic Society Collection at the National Media Museum, Bradford, United Kingdom.

<sup>12</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *Some prints by Alvin Langdon Coburn*, *Camera Work*, number 6, April 1904, 17–18. Hartmann often wrote under the name Sidney Allan.



Fig. 4. Pierre Dubreuil, *Mightiness*, oil print, 1909.

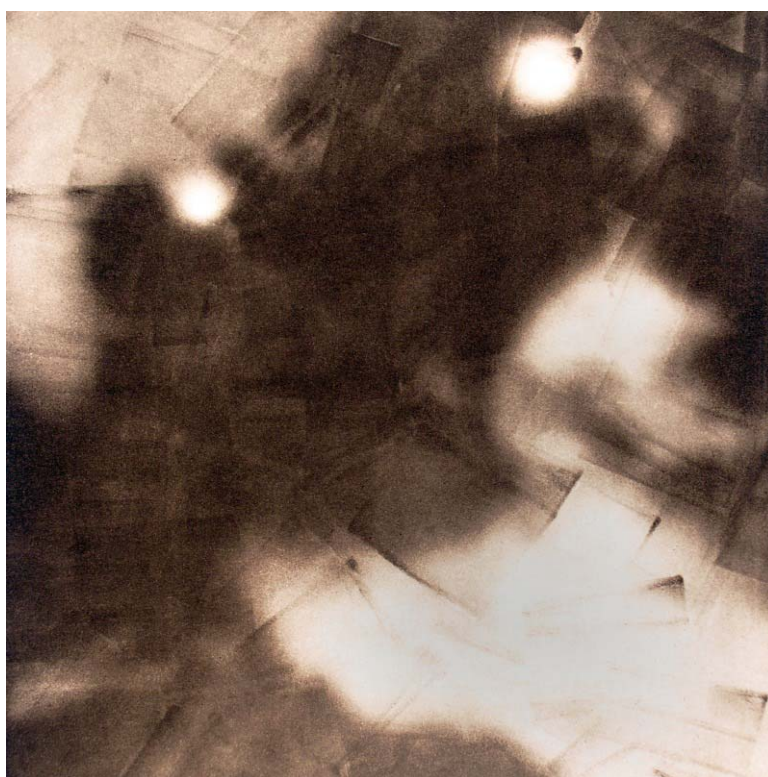


Fig. 5. Pierre Dubreuil, *Interpretations Picasso: The Railway*, photogravure, c. 1911.

Playwright George Bernard Shaw, an avid amateur photographer, saw similar distinctions in Coburns' newest photographs. In the bold preface to the exhibition at the Liverpool Amateur Photographic Association



in 1906, Shaw is one of the first to write about modern photography. He compares Coburn's liberated approach to the modern sculpture of Auguste Rodin. The success of the photographs arises from a deliberate break from conventional materials and skills that is described fervently:

*Look at this portrait of Mr. Gilbert Chesterton, for example! Call that technique? Why, the head is not even on the plate. The delineation is so blunt that the lens must have been the bottom knocked out of a tumbler; and the exposure was too long for a vigorous image... Mr. Coburn has represented him as swelling off the plate... and blurring his own outlines in the process... unconsciously handled his subject as Rodin handled Balzac. You may call the placing of the head on the plate, wrong, the focusing, wrong, the exposure wrong, if you like; but Chesterton is right.*

Shaw continues to praise the use of the camera, and the conscious venture beyond technique and detail by Coburn, as "modernist" in approach.

*If you consider that result merely a lucky blunder, look at the portrait of Mr. Bernard Partridge! There is no lack of vigour in that image: it is deliberately weighted by comparative under-exposure (or its equivalent in under-development), and the result is a powerfully characteristic likeness... It is the technique that has been adapted to the subject. With the same batch of films, the same lens, the same camera, the same developer, Mr. Coburn can handle you as Bellini handled everybody... according to his vision of you. He is free of that clumsy tool – the human hand...*

*He drives at the poetic... his impulse is always to convey a mood and not impart local information... This is done without any impoverishment or ratification*<sup>13</sup>.

The same year Coburn made portraits of Shaw and Rodin seeing the sculptor's work first-hand. The Liverpool exhibition also consisted of photographs with patterns and forms from ship docks and high-angled viewpoints made with the camera in London. Another picture titled "Shadows and Reflections" included water shapes from light beneath a bridge over a canal in Venice. Coburn began creating new subjects from the routine details of everyday life. Seen in new ways by what Shaw noted as the "artistic perception" with an attention to form over camera rendered details.

Early the following year in 1907, several of these photographs were part of the Exhibition of Modern Photography at the Goupil Gallery in London. Months later a part of Coburn's solo exhibition at the Photo-Secession galleries at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York. Juan C. Abel, editor of *The Photographer* magazine further noted the transition: "Coburn presents these things in a new light... He is the *enfant prodige* of modern photography"<sup>14</sup>.

From the body of Coburn's work, two sections of photogravures were made to include in the January 1908 issue of *Camera Work*. The first section of the pictures included traditional landscapes and portraits. The second section contained proto modern photographs with a bold sense of design. Particularly in the silhouettes and patterns of bridges, ships and leaves as forms and structure acted independently. A photograph of ship with mast outlines and water reflections titled *Spider Webs* distances the viewer from the reality of pure description and camera details. The Pictorial photograph in style and print, was a precursor to modern subjects and views printed four years later in other photographic mediums. *The Octopus*, 1912 contains a bird's-eye view of snow shoveled sidewalks of Madison Square in New York City (Fig. 6). Perspective is eliminated by the point of view as organic curved forms dominate the light and dark composition.

Coburn saw modern art at the Photo-Secession galleries, by traveling to Europe, and working in the studio of innovative design teacher Arthur Wesley Dow. However his close friendship with Cubist painter Max Weber, who he met in 1910 fully introduced the tenets of modern doctrine. In a letter to writer, playwright and collector Gertrude Stein in Paris, the same year of *The Octopus*, he wrote: "I first became interested in the work of the modern school [White School of Photography] through my friend Max Weber

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<sup>13</sup> G. Bernard Shaw, preface to Alvin Langdon Coburn, Liverpool: The Liverpool Amateur Photographic Association, April 30 – May 14, 1906.

<sup>14</sup> Juan C. Abel, *Editorial Comment: Alvin Langdon Coburn, The Photographer*, volume 6, number 151, March 19, 1907, 323 f.

of New York”<sup>15</sup>. At the time Coburn experimented with a strong sense of design and form by combining fine printmaking with Pictorialist sense of craftsmanship. Forming industrial subjects and architecture by the camera with an undertone of abstract tendencies.



Fig. 6. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *The Octopus*, platinum photograph, 1912.

Weber lectured on art and photography for Clarence White’s class at Columbia University in New York City in 1910. Leading to teaching ancient and modern art history at the Clarence H. White School, which opened in 1914 and represented the first curriculum in modern photography. Art, photography, abstraction and design became part of course work. In the prospectus, Weber’s lectures helped “analyze the

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to Gertrude Stein in Paris from Alvin Langdon Coburn, April 30, 1913, collection of Joy S. Weber.



fundamental principles... in ancient and modern plastic arts” and discussed the “relationship of photography to the other plastic arts”<sup>16</sup>. As founders of the School with Clarence White and Paul Anderson, who introduced a variety of photographic media, Weber’s studies at the Pratt Institute in New York, the Julian Academy and study with Henri Matisse in Paris, contributed unique modernist perspectives.

Lessons from Weber’s course in art history and design provided impetus for proto modern forms of photography by students as Bernard Shea Horne, Morton Shamberg, Laura Gilpin and others (Fig. 7–9). Coburn was mentioned as a partner in school critiques and lectures with other photographers such as Paul Strand. Strand began making his early modern photographs in Twin Lakes, Connecticut in 1916 (Fig. 10). Charles Sheeler created his first reductive studio details in 1917 made from exterior and interior views of the Doylestown House in Pennsylvania, which he shared with painter and photographer Shamberg. Sheeler’s work was described as conveying “a certain fundamental truth underlying the ‘modernist’ theories” in the essay *Modernist Photographs* in *American Art News* the same year<sup>17</sup>.

In 1911, Coburn wrote about modern photography and abstraction in *The Relation of Time to Art*. Photography was “the most modern of arts... more suited to the art requirement of this age of scientific achievement than any other”<sup>18</sup>. The same year he traveled to Yosemite National Park and to the Grand Canyon in the western United States to explore new subjects and printing processes. A second journey into the following year provided a wider range of imagery within the vast scale of the spectacular geologic terrain of the Grand Canyon.

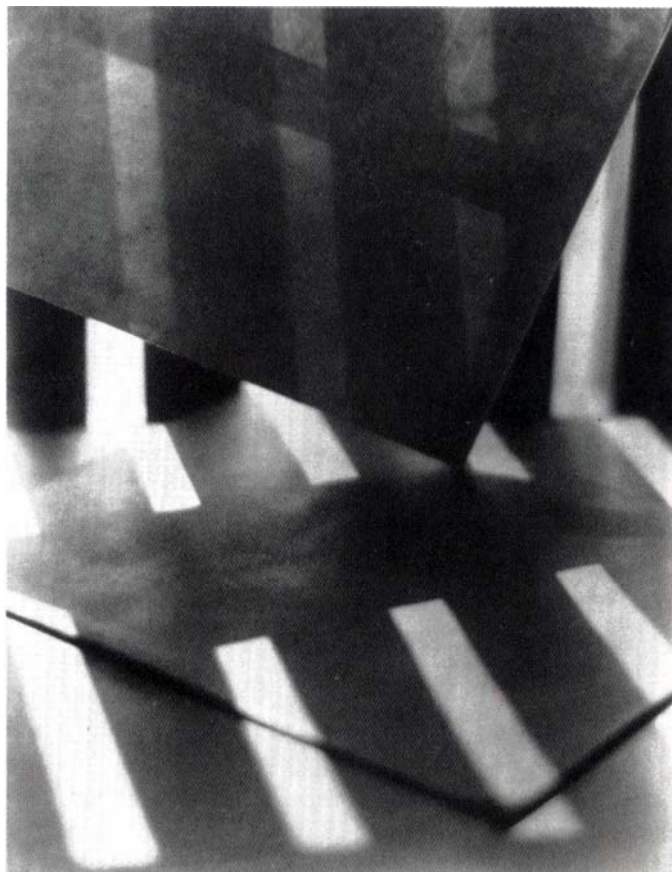


Fig. 7. Bernard Shea Horne, untitled, platinum photograph, c. 1916–1917.

<sup>16</sup> *The Clarence H. White School of Photography*, prospectus, 1915, unpaginated, collection of Joy S. Weber.

<sup>17</sup> Sheeler’s proto modern work reviewed in *Modernist Photographs*, *American Art News*, Volume 16, Number 10, December 15, 1917. Also see Van Deren Coke, *The Cubist Photographs of Paul Strand and Morton Shamberg*, One Hundred Years of Photographic history, Essays in Honor of Beaumont Newhall, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 35.42, and *A Catalog of Design Photographs by Bernard Shea Horne*, New York: Keith Douglas de Lillis Fine Art Photography, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn, *The Relation of Time to Art*, *Camera Work*, number 35, October 1911, 72–73.

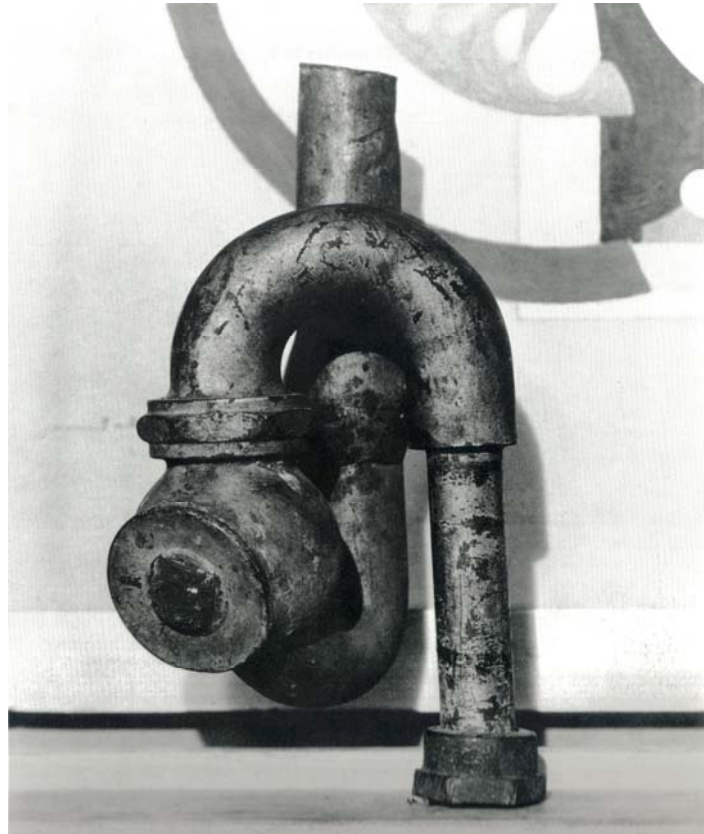


Fig. 8. Morton Shamburg, *God*, gelat in silver photograph, c. 1916.

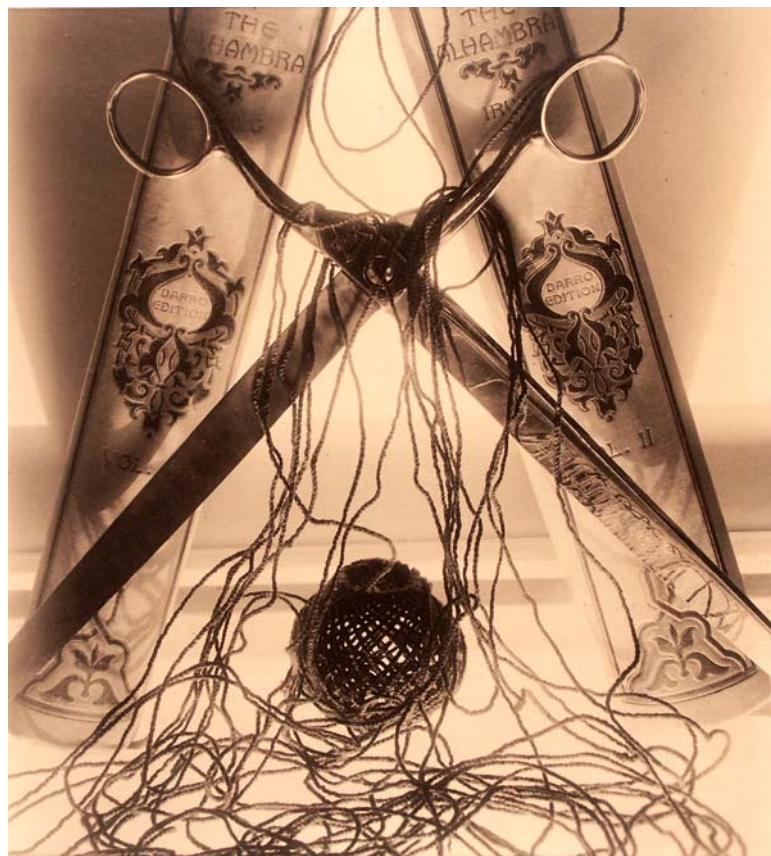


Fig. 9. Laura Gilpin, *Scissors and String*, platinum photograph, 1918.

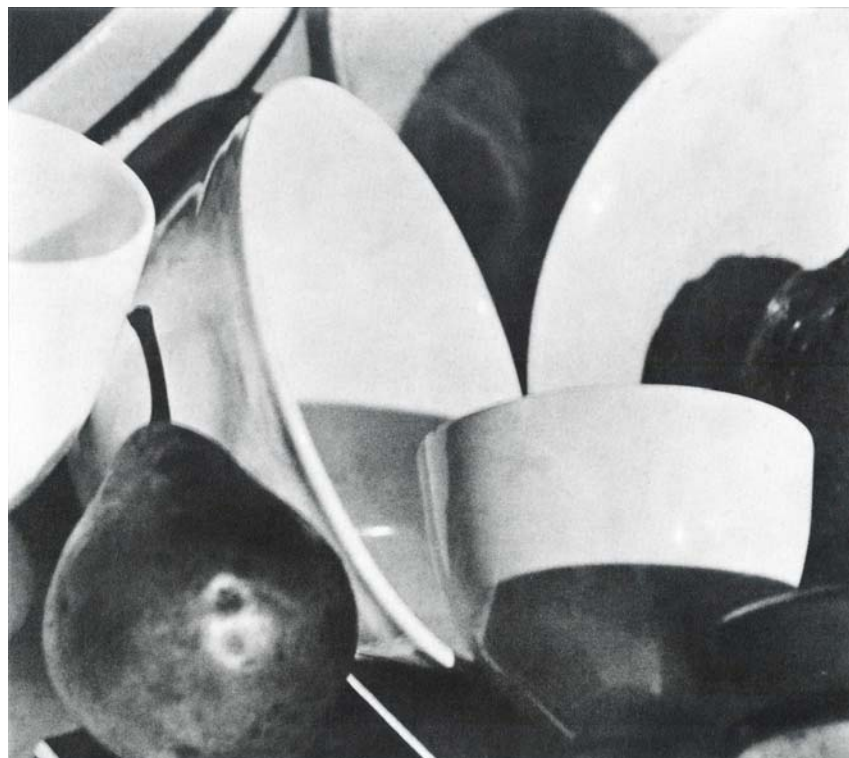


Fig. 10. Paul Strand, *Still Life with Pear and Bowls*, Twin Lakes, Connecticut, 1916, Satista photograph.

The artist created almost dimensionless photographs including abstract elements of form using changing light patterns, weather and clouds. One of earliest proto modern photographs is *The Great Temple* (Fig. 11), which combined platinum printing with the gum bichromate process. The Pictorialists revered both contact printing methods independently made with large negatives. Coburn's point of view, geometry, compression of space, light and dark patterns that are printed into silhouetted shapes provide modern alternatives. The literal subject of landscape and details becomes secondary. The new modern subject invented by the photographer.

In 1913, the transformation into modern photography progressed as Coburn "saw with new eyes" in New York City<sup>19</sup>. Marius de Zayas discussed photography as another form of modernism in *Camera Work*. "Art at all times, has been composed of two elements: the idea and the fact; that is, the subjective and the objective" he wrote, "culminating, so far as relates to plastic representation... in Photography. The Modern movement of art presents the phenomenon of being equally subjective and objective"<sup>20</sup>. Coburn's photographs defined the modern aesthetic. Photographing above from skyscrapers looking down, tilting his camera from high points of view and replacing lenses with material consisting of smaller sized pinholes for greater definition. The result in the New York photographs was similar to the diminished perspectives found in the Grand Canyon prints. Flattened spaces and the invention of forms from unfamiliar viewpoints, like aerial photographs, emphasized shapes and geometric elements as primary content<sup>21</sup>.

Coburn further exhibited seventy modern photographs including the Grand Canyon and New York views at London's Goupil Gallery. The same year as the American International Exhibition of Modern Art known as the Armory Show in 1913 in New York City, organized by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. The catalog essay by W. Howe Downes of the *Boston Transcript* noted the grand scale of landscape photographs that "only this artist's imagination could properly transform into new subjects. Such photographs succeeded in ways that purely representational views by painters had not. They provided a "unique revenge on the part of a once despised art!". Coburn urged photographers to liberate the medium in

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Newhall, *Alvin Langdon Coburn: A Portfolio of Sixteen Photographs*, Rochester: George Eastman House, 1962, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Marius de Zayas, *Modern Art – Theories and Representations*, *Camera Work*, October 1913. For the many modern contributions of de Zayas see Francis, M. Naumann, editor, *How, When, and Why Modern Art Came to New York*, Marius de Zayas, Boston: MIT Press, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> B. Newhall, *Photo Eye of the 20s*, unpublished manuscript, *ibidem*, 19a.



the artist's statement. The "camera artists" should go beyond the "verity of the camera" and break away from the worn out conventions... and claim the freedom of expression which any art must have to be alive"<sup>22</sup>.

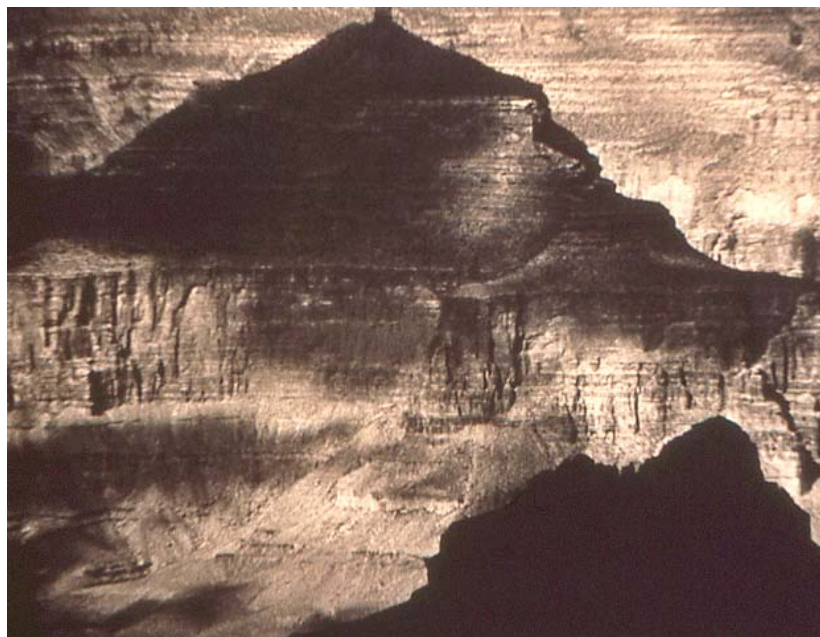


Fig. 11. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *The Great Temple* [Grand Canyon], platinum photograph with gum bichromate, 1911.

The photographer related his modern photography to art in the section of "New York from its Pinnacles," which included five works. He described his geometric and angular photograph, looking down from a high view at the Woolworth building "as fantastic in its perspective as a Cubist fantasy". Titled "The Thousand Windows, 1912" (Fig. 12) and made the same year his friend Max Weber completed the painting of the same building from a similar vantage point<sup>23</sup>. Other modern photographs from the series such as "Trinity Church from Above" (Fig. 13) include the artist's viewpoint in the title. Conveying a related sense of divided independent forms found in the collage aesthetic of Cubism.

Music was also important to both artists. Weber often used music in teaching and made what he termed "music pictures". He shared them with the photographer who played compositions from such modern composers as Stravinsky and Debussy on his pianola, often writing Weber about concerts. They corresponded about the relationship between modern art and music. Another means of distillation of content in melodic form. "I have in mind to make some «Music = Photographs»", Coburn wrote, "I always want to photograph the essence of things rather their husks and shells." The integral relationship between modern music and art is described in correspondence of the period<sup>24</sup>. The artists also planned a book about modern photography that was never realized in part because of World War I.

By 1916 the photographer developed another facet of modern photography with pure abstraction. He created kaleidoscopic imagery with the camera including portraits made of poet Ezra Pound, the head of the Vorticist movement in literature in London. Related to Cubism and Futurism, Coburn named his works "Vortographs" in direct association to the geometric style. Abstract photographs that stood alongside other modern art. "There are moderns in painting, in Music, and in Literature. What would our grandfathers have said of the work of Matisse, Stravinsky and Gertrude Stein... it has occurred to me, why should not the camera also throw off the shackles of conventional representation and attempt something fresh and untried?"<sup>25</sup>. Coburn was one of many pioneers of early forms of proto modern photography.

<sup>22</sup> W. Howe Downes and Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Camera Pictures by Alvin Langdon Coburn*, London: The Goupil Gallery, October 1913, unpaginated.

<sup>23</sup> *Camera Pictures by Alvin Langdon Coburn*, The Goupil Gallery, *ibidem*. For a comparison of the photograph and painting of the Woolworth building by Coburn and Weber see Percy North, *Max Weber, the Cubist Decade, 1910–1920*, *ibidem*, color plate 27.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Coburn to Weber, August 19, 1914, also April 6, 1913 and July 8, 1914, collection of Joy S. Weber.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to Beaumont Newhall, April 11, 1947. For a detailed account of Coburn's development of Vortographs see Frank Di Federico, *Alvin Langdon Coburn and the Genesis of Vortographs*, *History of Photography, an international quarterly*, October – December 1987, 265–296.



Fig. 12. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *The Thousand Windows*, gelatin silver photograph, 1912.

Photography was central to a wide array of modernist theories and movements. Antonio Bragaglia and brother Arturo, members of Italian Futurism in painting, captured motion in photographs to establish an independent movement with the manifesto *Fotodinamismo futurista* (Futurist Photodynamism) in 1911. Two years later Antonio published sixteen examples of photodynamism (Fig. 14). Developing related modern theory from the elements of time in movement with the camera that was uniquely photographic.

*Photodynamism then, can establish results from the positive data in the construction of moving reality, just as photography obtains its own positive results in the sphere of static reality.... our aim to make a determined move away from reality, since cinematography, photography and chronophotography already exist. We see the interior essence of things: pure movement; and we prefer to see everything in motion, since as things are dematerialized in motion they become idealized... it is by these means that we are attempting to raise photography to the heights which today it strives impotently to attain<sup>26</sup>.*

<sup>26</sup> Antonio Giulio Bragaglia, *Fotodinamismo futurista*, Rome: Natalia Editore, 1913. Historian Beaumont Newhall notes that no copy of the first 1911 publication has been located in *The History of Photography*, fifth edition, Chapter 11, footnote 10, 305. Translation reprinted in Christopher Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era, European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Aperture, 1989, 292, 293.



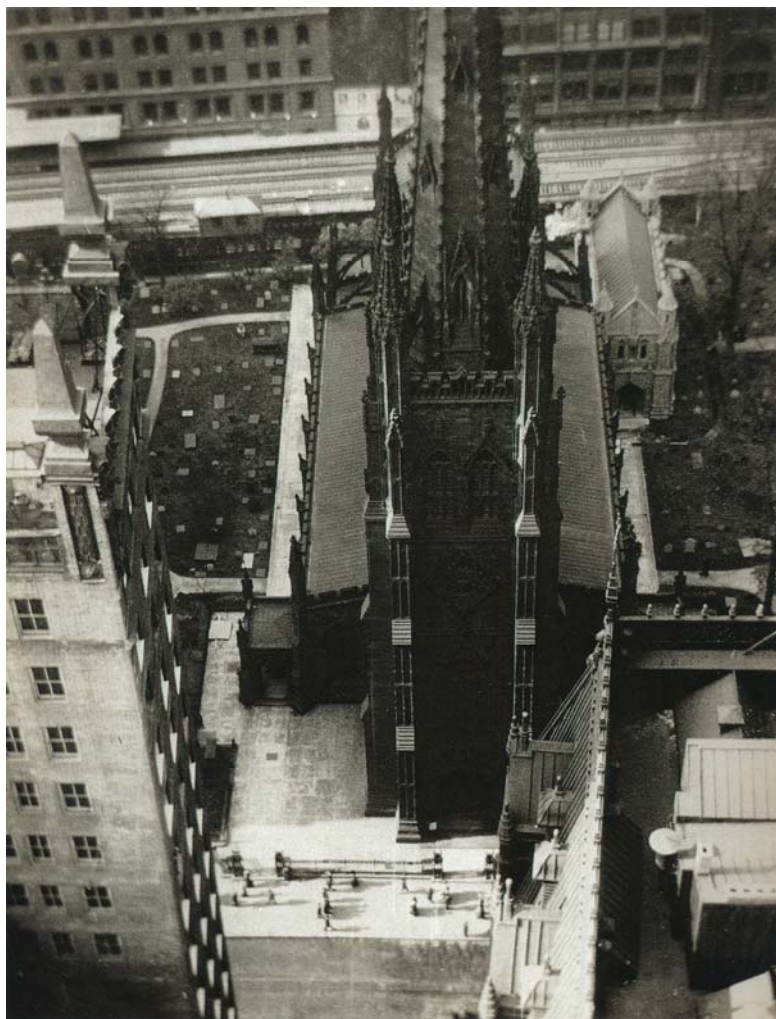


Fig. 13. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Trinity Church from Above*, platinum photograph, 1912.

*Fotodynamica* was considered a new modern medium outside traditional photography and painting. Italian Futurist painters rejected photography as an art form and the modern photographic movement was short lived.

Other new mediums were invented and media advanced through various experiments that laid the foundation for modern photography in the coming century. Dadaist Christian Schad invented the modern photogram. The medium that he named “Schadographs” was based historically on the photogenic drawings of William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the inventors of photography (Fig.15). Placing various objects onto unexposed photography paper, and then exposing to light without negatives from the camera, photograms basically recorded the silhouette shapes. With a vocabulary of abstraction, geometry and layers of transparency automatically built into the process. Other modernists as Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky invented their own versions independently.

The printing press and especially photolithography offered associated developments. Not only making modern photography available to the masses from the pages of avant-garde journals to oversize posters. Books, newspapers and multimedia printed in various forms of photography with ink on paper. Gustavs Klucis first introduced cut and fragmented photographs to his paintings, drawings and printmaking after military reassignment to Moscow and art school training in Latvia. His modern photomontage *Assault, 1918* combined photographs with earlier experiments from mixing traditional art mediums with various materials and media (Fig. 16). *Assault* expands the hand-made elements of painting and drawing with Cubist and Futurist dimensions. Further noted by the artist’s hand writing as a “thematic composition into abstraction”<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> The artist notes his individual development of abstraction in “Assault” under the lower left of the mounted work in pencil: “a thematic composition into abstraction”. Iveta Derkusova, *Gustavs Klucis: The Search for a Revolutionary Form of Art, Gustavs Klucis, En el frente del arte constructivista/Gustavs Klucis, On the Constructivist Art Front*, 2014, 11 (English), 19 (Spanish).





Fig. 14. Antonio Giulio Bragaglia, *Le Fumeur*, gold-toned gelatin silver photograph with ink drawing, 1913.

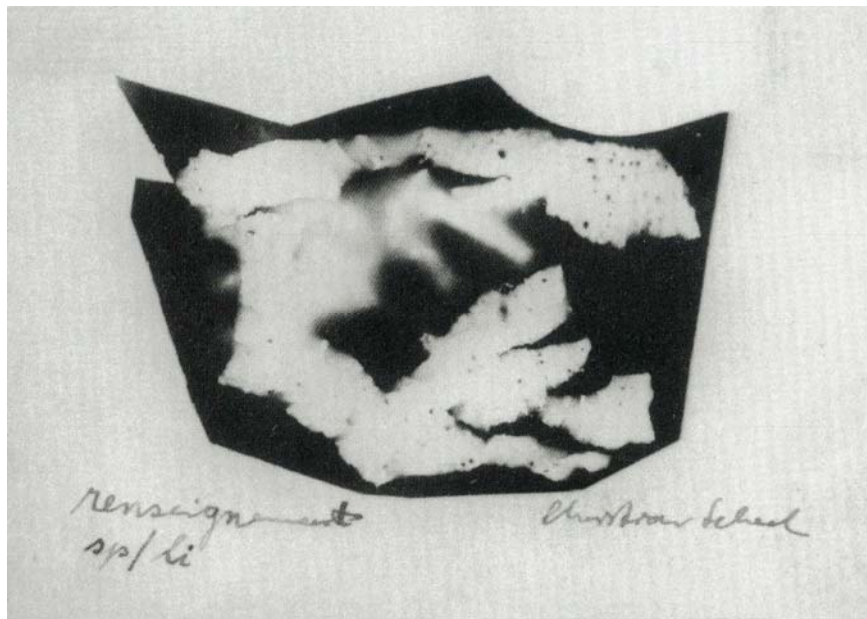


Fig. 15. Christian Schad, *Renseignements*, photogram, 1919.

“These were the very first germinal beginnings of [modern] photomontage... and several other experimental works.” Beginning as a military and historical theme in Moscow with allegorical references, the artist explored abstract form, color and space beyond purely narrative subjects. His mastery of modern photomontage included his own black and white photographs with those selected in printed media, from journals, newspapers and postcards to magazines. Multidisciplinary approaches including color, photolithography and collaborations of his wife, artist Valentina Kulagina<sup>28</sup>. Other modernists immediately would advance modern photomontage during the early formation of the USSR including, Aleksandr

<sup>28</sup> Клуцис Густав Густавович (Klucis Gustav Gustavovich), Советские художники. Т. 1, Живописцы и графики (*Soviet Artists, Painters and Graphic Artists*, volume 1), М., ИЗОГИЗ (M., IZOGIZ), 1937, 116.

Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova with Vladimir Mayakovsky, Lyubov Popova, Georgi and Vladimir Stenberg, M. Dlugach, E. Semenova, I. Ganf, P. P. Sokolov-Skalya, and I. Guminer among many others.

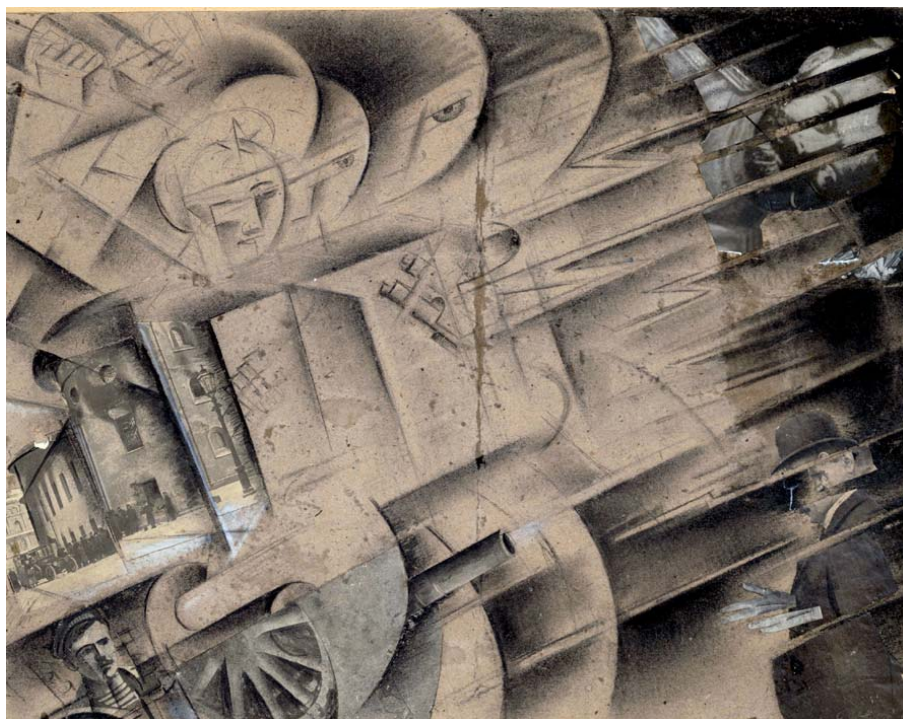


Fig. 16. Gutavs Klucis, *Assault*, modern photomontage with drawing and painting, 1918, Latvian National Museum of Art.

The German defeat in the First World War also set the stage for a relentless critique of culture by artists multiplying their modern photomontages with printed media in the thousands. The Dadaists opposed bourgeois society and modern industry that promoted the War by the government with other political miscalculations. The Dadaists augmented hand drawn representations by experiments with found photographs and added typographical elements. Disjointed bits and pieces of photographic compositions as anti-art provocations of Dada were supplemented by public performances in nonsensical sound poetry.

Modern photomontage was an art of edges and undeniable truths by the German Dadaists (Fig. 17). Inventors Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, John Heartfield, George Grosz, Max Ernst and others expressed their disdain for the chaos and cultural fragmentation after the War. “Giving something entirely unreal all the appearances of something real that had actually been photographed”, said Hannah Höch, “to integrate objects from the world of machines and industry in the world of art... by imposing, on something which could only be produced by hand, the appearances of something that had been entirely composed by a machine... in an arrangement that no machine could yet compose”<sup>29</sup>.

The Dadaists trained in various traditional art schools before breaking away from conventional forms of art with typographical experiments and found photographs that were appropriated from mass-produced media. Selecting imagery cut from printed magazine pages of photographs from ink on paper included American mass culture. As co-inventors of modern photomontage, they created their cut and pasted versions in the studio without their use of a camera. Compositions of found photographs from the printed page were made to be rephotographed and printed anew on the printing press. Multiplying the final form of expression into mechanically manufactured

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Hannah Höch by Edouard Roditi, *Arts*, New York, December 1959 republished in Lucy R. Lippard, Editor, *Dadas on Art*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971, 72. Also see Stephen C. Foster, *The Cognition of Culture: Berlin Dada, Photography, and the Ideology of Space* in *Poetics of Space: A Critical Photographic Anthology*, S. Yates, Editor, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995, 99–114. For modern photomontage contributions in depth by German Dadaists see the recent series of Archiv-Editions and catalog raisonnés histories with documents, correspondence and texts of Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann from the Künstler-Archiven der Berlinischen Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur, 1995–2001. Also exhibition catalog *Hannah Höch*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia with Ediciones Aldeasa, Madrid, 2004. Eckhard Siepmann, *Montage: John Heartfield, von Club Dada Zur Arbeiter-Illustrierten Zeitung*, Berlin: Elefanten Press Galerie, 1977. Werner Spies, *Max Ernst Collages, The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991.

pages that were printed into the thousands, most often on pages of newspapers, magazines and avant-garde journals. The inventions of modern photomontage in Germany and Russia were an unlimited compendium of media, materials and technologies that reached beyond exhibition walls.



Fig. 17. Raoul Hausmann, *Synthetisches Cino der Malerei*, modern photomontage, 1918.

From Moscow to urban centers of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the Russian Avant-garde created prototypes of modern photography not found elsewhere. Multiple forms created in a variety of means that spread throughout Europe. Early modernists began to transform traditional genre such as portraiture, landscape and still life with photography, new approaches, materials, and through a wide array of art forms and media. Modern photography advanced in the currents of progressive art movements such as Constructivism and Suprematism. Inheriting lessons from Futurism and Cubism as well as the centuries-old tradition of Russian iconography from the Byzantine era. Artists and photographers embraced new facets of style and content in form, color, abstraction and language that added to the growing complexity of modernism in art.

Aleksandr Rodchenko further distinguished photography's unique role as the quintessential modern medium for the contemporary artist, abandoning past definitions. "We are fighting against easel painting not because it is aestheticized but because it is not contemporary, its representation is technically weak, cumbersome... We are not really fighting painting (it will die out anyway) but with the photography that "looks like painting", "looks like etching", "looks like engraving", "looks like drawing", "looks like sepia tint", "looks like watercolor"<sup>30</sup>. The artist explored multidisciplinary innovations including modern photomontage before acquiring and using the camera.

<sup>30</sup> Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Warning!*, *Новый ЛЕФ (Novy Lef)*, number 11, 1928. Edited by Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip Brik with covers designed by Rodchenko, the journal expanded new technologies such as modern photography, photomontage and film in essays and design.





Fig. 18. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Mena Vsekh*, three-dimensional modern photomontage, 1924, Private Collection.

Rodchenko expanded subjects into broader themes including the human figure and topography that supported the transformation of subjects. Adding inventive viewpoints aided by the increasing mobility of cinematic technology and design, such as the first smaller, hand-held film and 35mm still cameras. In spring 1925 the artist acquired the Sept hand-held film camera and the Ika, the precursor to the 35mm Leica. He began to use the 35mm Ika from low points of view for several weeks in Paris. Returning to Moscow in the summer, Rodchenko developed his international style with high and low points of view outside the studio.<sup>31</sup>

Publications designed for the printing press became another avenue for the artist to explore color with black and white photography, photomontage, typographical design and three-dimensional photomontage constructions with other photographic elements elements (Fig. 18). “We need to revolutionize our visual thinking,” he wrote. While many of his first photographs were made to include in modern photomontages, Rodchenko needed “simple, clear and symbolic pictures, corresponding directly to geometric patterns in his constructivist graphic designs”<sup>32</sup>. His modern vision and style with high and low photographs made from the camera followed.

<sup>31</sup> See “Rodchenko’s Diverse Photographic Modernism”, *Aleksander Rodchenko, Abangoardiako argazkigintzea, fotomontaketea eta zinemagintzea (Modern photography, photomontage and film)*, Bilbao: Fundación Bilbao Bizkaia Kutxa Fundazioa, 2003, trilingual publication for the international traveling exhibition curated and edited by Steve Yates, assembled by Curatorial Assistance and the Art Museum, University of New Mexico.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander Lavrentiev, *The New Photographic Vision in Action, Alexander Rodchenko, Modern photography, photomontage and film*, *ibidem*, 234.

László Moholy-Nagy also extended modern ideas through practice and theory. Light became a medium of expression as photography “destroyed the canons of representational, imitative art” to contribute to modernism as a way “to achieve new experiences, a new wealth of optical expression” (Fig. 19). “The copying of nature by means of the photographic camera and the mechanical reproduction of perspective,” he wrote, “have been rendered obsolete by the work of modern artists”<sup>33</sup>. Like Moholy-Nagy and Rodchenko, El Lissitzky redefined photography through the expansion of modernist vision in all mediums: “Photography cannot be reduced to getting into focus and releasing the shutter...photography possesses properties not available to painting...and it is essential to develop them. When we enrich ourselves through a language of special expressivity, we enrich ourselves with one more means of influencing our consciousness and our emotions” (Fig. 20)<sup>34</sup>. Modern culture under construction by these contemporaries innovated photography in unprecedented ways.

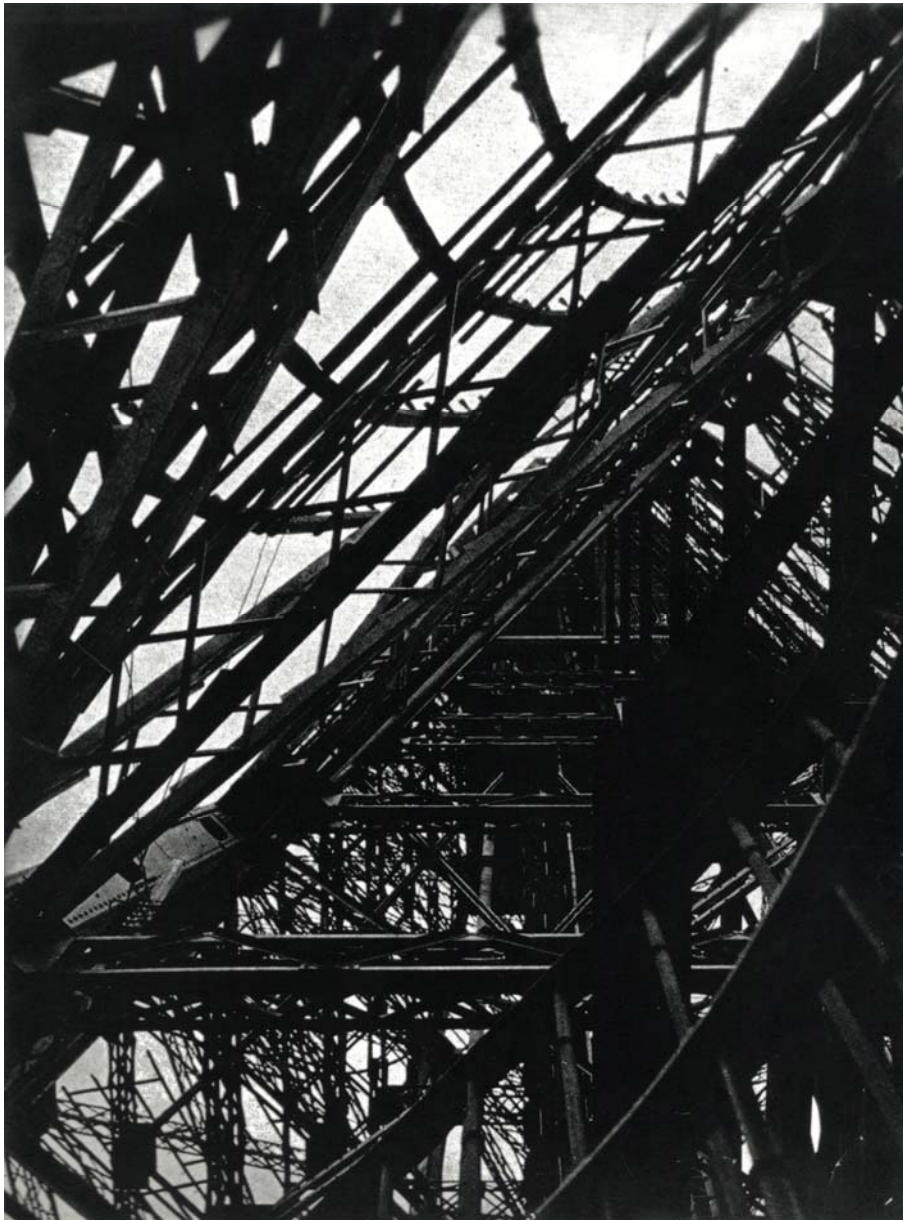


Fig. 19. László Moholy-Nagy, *Paris [Eiffel Tower]*, gelatin silver photograph, 1925.

<sup>33</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *From Pigment to Light*, 1934 published in *Telehor*, numbers 1–2, Brno, 1936 and *Light – A Medium of Plastic Expression*, *Broom*, volume 4, number 4, March 1923, 283.

<sup>34</sup> El Lissitzky, *Photography (fotopis)*, *Sovetskoe foto (Soviet Photo)*, May 1929 reprinted in *El Lissitzky*, Eindhoven: Municipal Van Abbemuseum, 1990, 70.



Fig. 20. El Lissitzky, *The Constructor (self-portrait)*, gelatin silver photograph from two negatives with ink and gouache, 1924.



Fig. 21. Jaromír Funke, *Still Life with Ball*, gelatin silver photograph, c 1923.



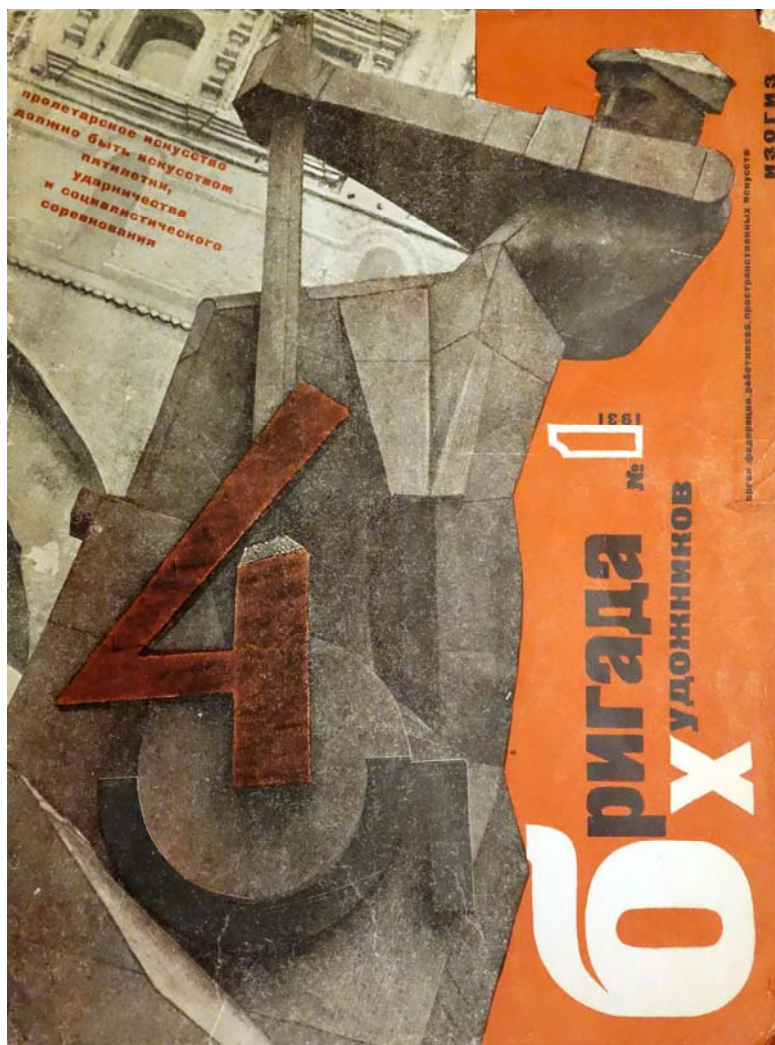


Fig. 22. Boris Ignatovich, *Художников бригада* (*Artists Brigade*), number 1, 1931, modern photomontage.

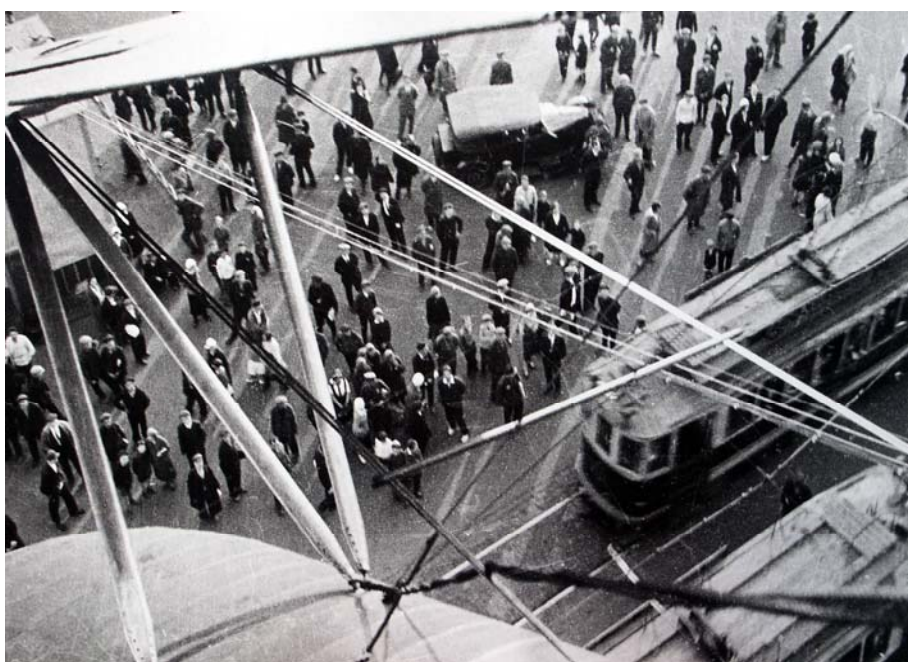


Fig. 23. Georgi Zelma, *Tramways, Moscow*, gelatin silver photograph, 1929, private collection.



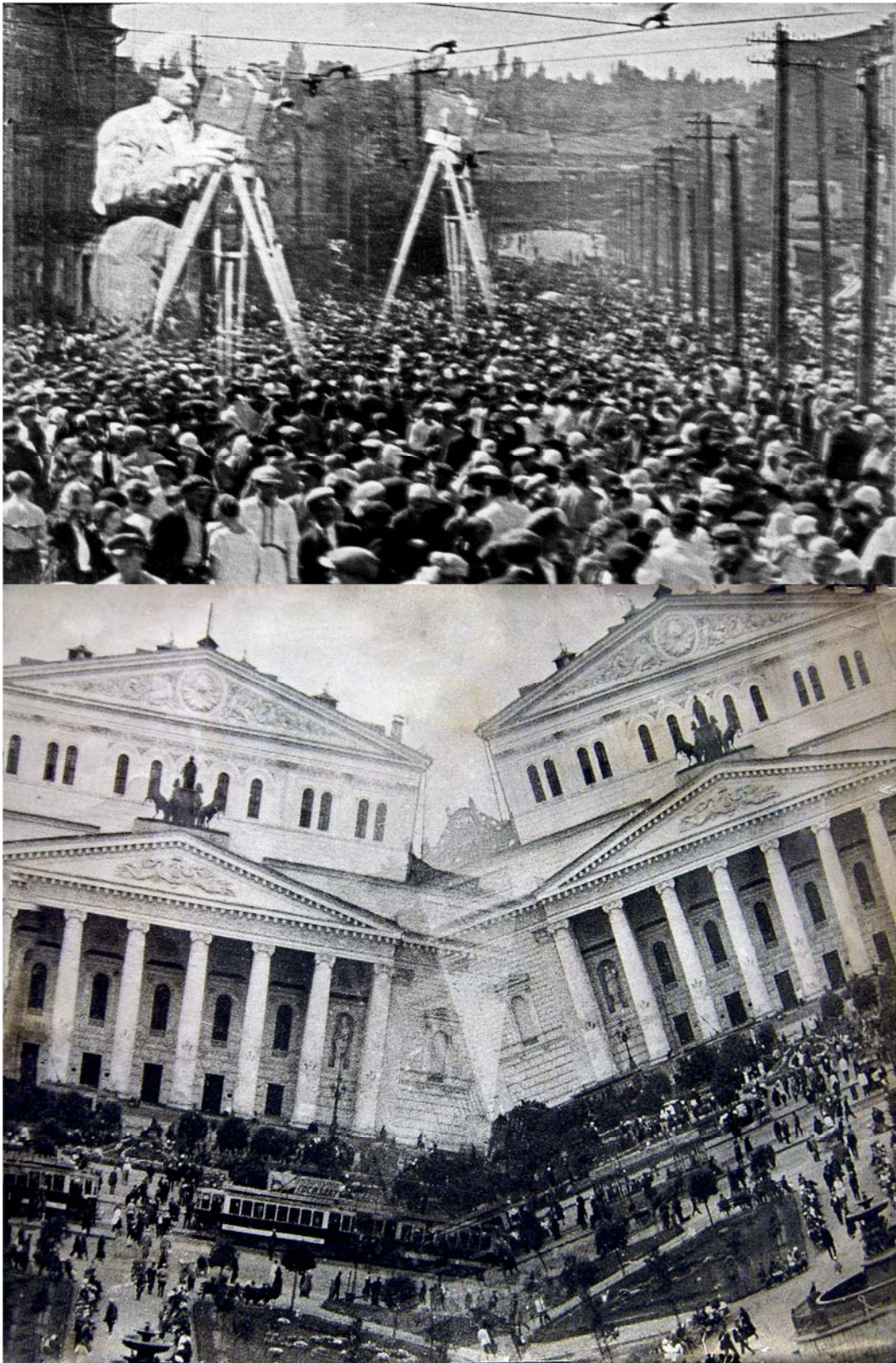


Fig. 24. Dziga Vertov (director) and Elizaveta Svilova (editor),  
cinematic montages from *Man with a Movie Camera*, experimental documentary film, 1929.



Fig. 25. Edward Weston, *Coolidge Dam*, gelatin silver photograph, 1937.

The wide range of modern practices and approaches throughout Eastern and Central Europe provides extraordinary diversity in directions. Jaromír Funke fabricated geometric still-lives, with light and shadows created in the studio after experimenting with photograms. Constructing abstract forms with two-dimensional light patterns and found objects (Fig. 21)<sup>35</sup>. Other artists contributed to the many cross-influences between photography, photomontage and cinema as well as modern documentary styles. Varvara Stepanova, Lyubov Popova, Valentina Kulagina, Boris Ignatovich (Fig. 22), Max Alpert, Georgi Zelma (Fig. 23), Simon Friedland, Dmitry Debabov, Solomon Telingater, Victor Mikulin, Sergei Sienken, Arkady Shaikhet, Smirnov-Chold, Eleasar Langman and Aure Bauch in Romania; and modern filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov (Fig. 24), Alexander Dovzhenko, Esther Schub, Lev Kulelshov, Eugène Deslav (Evgeny Stavschenko), Grigori Kozintsev, Leonid Trauberg, Peter Novitzki, J. Petrov, A. Samsonov and others during the formative years of a developing USSR.

Proto modernists from the United States to Europe and Russia pursued artistic and documentary potentials that were discovered in individual styles and meaning<sup>36</sup>. Artists and writers developed new criteria and language concerning independent qualities mastered by the limitations of the medium (Fig. 25). Paul Strand underlined such limits as part of their inherent artistic strength: "Photography... finds its *raison d'être*, like all media, in a complete uniqueness of means. This is an absolute unqualified objectivity. Unlike the other arts, which are really anti-photographic, this objectivity is of the very essence of photography, its contribution at the same time its limitations... The full potential power of every medium is dependent upon the purity of its use"<sup>37</sup>. Diversity found throughout the early contributions of modern photography shifted away from literal description. Pure factual rendering with the camera was replaced by artistic intention. Expressing a new world of values and vision under construction.

<sup>35</sup> S. Yates, *Jaromír Funke: Proto Modern Photography and Influence (Jaromír Funke: Protomoderní fotografie a vlivy)*, Bulletin Moravské galerie v Brně, 62, 2006, 109.

<sup>36</sup> S. Yates, *The Birth of Modern Photography: Origins of Artistic and Documentary Style from Russia and America*, *ZOOM Photographic Journal*, MediaPUB Publishing House and Editrice Progresso, Moscow, July – August 2007, 66–69 and "Georgi Zelma: Early Modern Documentary Photography, 1924–1944," *Foto & Video*, Moscow, October 2007, 3–11.

<sup>37</sup> *Photography*, Camera Work, numbers 49–50, June 1917, 3.



What and how subjects were selected with the camera became as important as ideas that the artist brought to the final form of expression. From black and white photography, to color in the studio, and ink on paper printed for the masses. The shift from historical genre into individual styles helped redefine modern photographic expression without borders. Articulating facets of life with endless shapes of change during the era. Modern photography in all of its various forms set the stage for faster moving technologies and ideas historically. That continues to move beyond the chemical darkroom. Digital science, engineering, systems, methods and economics endlessly expand photographic expression. From ink on paper to video and digital screen technologies, which offer unlimited artistic potentials again for the new century and beyond.